

SPECIAL REPORT #1

Champagne and Sparkling Wines

Certain writers on wine-making (who should have known better) have concluded some of their recipes with the words: "This will make a lovely sparkling wine." They also call certain of their recipes "So-and-so Champagne". The directions they give are the same as those for making any other sort of wine; the result, therefore, cannot be a champagne unless it happens by an accident not allowed for in the recipe. What probably happened is that these "experts" once made a sparkling wine by accident, and not knowing how or why it had happened, simply attributed the effervescence to one of the ingredients and passed the recipe on to their public as champagne.

As we all know, champagne is made from grapes; anything resembling champagne made from fruit other than grapes must then be termed "sparkling wine", and considerable experience is needed before these can be made satisfactorily and without accident. In the early stages proceed as with any other wine, putting the wine under fermentation locks after fourteen days' fermentation. But instead of allowing the wine to ferment itself out, watch carefully until fermentation has almost ceased; at this stage the wine should be carefully bottled with as little lees as possible.

Great care must be taken from now on, for our aim is to seal the bottles while the champagne is still fermenting. If we seal them too soon the result will be a series of explosions - and curses upon my head - and if we seal them too late we shall merely produce a wine with a weak sparkle that will expend itself in a few minutes, leaving behind it a still wine.

I have chosen this method for readers of this book for I do believe it to be the simplest. Another method calls for the addition of sugar to a blend of wines already made and matured. A yeast capable of withstanding the amount of alcohol in the blend is then introduced and fermentation allowed to go on in sealed containers, such as stone jars with the bungs wired on.

By using the method I recommend here, the reader has far greater hope of success, for he will be able to decide when fermentation has almost ceased and seal the bottles at the best time. Very strong bottles are needed; those used for aerated waters are excellent for our purpose for not only are they very strong but they have screw stoppers. Ordinary corks present an almost insurmountable difficulty for the inexperienced champagne-maker.

When the still-fermenting champagne is put into bottles fermentation may become very vigorous; if this happens, allow the fermentation to slow down before screwing home the stoppers. Fermentation will continue - despite the absence of air - and the carbon-dioxide gas will be absorbed into the wine.

When fermentation has ceased the champagne will deposit its lees and slowly become

clear. And this is where our troubles begin. Opening the bottles to re-bottle the clear champagne releases the gas, with the result that the lees rise up into the wine. It is a waste of time to screw down the stopper and wait for the wine to clear, for subsequent openings will meet with the same result until all the gas has been given off and has left behind it a still wine.

Our method, then, must be as follows. While the champagne is clearing, the bottles must be stood upside down in a partitioned cardboard crate. This will protect each bottle if by accident the stoppers have been screwed up too soon and one bottle happens to explode. This should not happen if strong bottles are used. If the bottles are stood upside down the lees settle on the stopper; the amount of lees present at this stage will depend on the care taken at the bottling and should not be more than one-eighth of an inch.

Now comes the real difficulty.

Carefully and very gently, and while the bottles are still held upside down, unscrew the stopper. It need only be turned a little way to allow the compressed carbon-dioxide gas to squirt out the lees. As soon as the lees have gone, screw up the stopper. (You can practice this with a bottle of aerated water.)

By using screw stoppers (screw caps are not suitable) the risk of the gas forcing the stopper right out, as would most certainly happen if ordinary corks were used, is eliminated.

My father tried to teach me the art of releasing the lees in this way, but always the cork forced itself out, to the accompaniment of growls from one with no patience for the incompetent. He used ordinary corks wired on, and I still marvel today at the ease with which he removed the wire, released the lees and wired on the cork again with never an accident.

Do not attempt to remove the lees until the champagne is crystal-clear, otherwise a second go will be necessary with perhaps too much loss of the gas essential to a sparkling wine.

Rhubarb "Champagne"

8 lb. rhubarb
5 lb. sugar
1 gallon water
yeast

Use baker's yeast if you wish, or use wine yeast according to the instructions of the supplier.

Remove leaves and stumps, wipe the sticks clean with a damp cloth and then proceed

with the method of your choice.

Blackcurrant “Champagne”

4 lb. blackcurrants
3½ lb. sugar
1 gallon water
yeast

Strip the fruits from the stalks and then proceed with the method of your choice.

Green Gooseberry “Champagne”

3-4 quarts gooseberries
4-5 lb. sugar according to the amount of fruit being used
1 gallon water
yeast

Crush the fruits and proceed with the method of your choice.

Apple “Champagne”

6 or 7 lb. firm, ripe, juicy fruit of any variety except cooking apples
4 lb. sugar
1 gallon water
yeast

If a press is not available the apples will have to be grated and then chopped. Do not peel or core them. Proceed with the method of your choice.

Pear “Champagne”

8 lb. reasonably sweet and juicy pears which must be firm and ripe
4 lb. sugar
1 gallon water
yeast

Crush the fruit if possible; if no press is available they should be grated. Do not peel or core. Proceed with the method of your choice.

As will be seen, any wine may be turned into a sparkling wine merely by following the method outlined above. Readers who fancy that their favorite fruit or root wine would be

improved by being made as a sparkling wine will now know what to do.

I must repeat my warning that considerable experience is needed before one is able to decide when fermentation has almost ceased and the time is ripe for screwing home the stoppers. The strong bottles I have recommended will withstand immense pressure, so the risk of explosion is not great. I have been using this method, and the bottles recommended, for many years without mishap.